

## The Nome Arranger: The Journeyman Archivist Program at the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum

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Nome Rotary Club meeting, April 2016. Photo by Julia Farris.

This spring I was given the opportunity to serve as the Journeyman Archivist at the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum in Nome, Alaska for six weeks. The program is sponsored by the Alaska State Historical Records Advisory Board (ASHRAB), a governor-appointed committee that makes recommendations on National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) grant proposals<sup>1</sup>. The Journeyman Archivist program connects small Alaskan cultural institutions that do not have permanent archives staff with a visiting archivist to process high-priority collections and provide guidance on managing the repository's archival materials. The McLain Museum was selected as the institutional grant recipient for 2016, and I was selected as the archivist.

As the epicenter of the brief but feverish Alaska Gold Rush in 1900, Nome is unique in the ways that it has exploded, shrunk, and persisted over the past century. The city has weathered and been shaped by major disasters – including a 1913 storm that washed away homes and businesses along a beachfront sandspit, and the 1934 fire that destroyed most of the old town's narrow streets and buildings<sup>2</sup>. Over the years Nome has been promoted as an aviation hub, was home to a White Alice Communication Station during the Cold War (the ruins of which make for a unique view from town), and continues to draw prospectors today, particularly with Discovery Channel's reality show *Bering Sea Gold* going on its fifth season.

The two collections chosen by the museum for processing were the papers of early Nome residents Carrie M. McLain and Clara Mielke Richards. Both included small accruals of papers and large amounts of visual materials. I also had time to process one addition collection, the papers of Alaska Steamship Company purser and Nome agent Joe Harnish. One of the major challenges in processing these collections was the inherent difference between museum and archival description levels, and learning to strike a balance between these two approaches. A great example of this was my work with the photographs in the McLain papers, which had already been sleeved, individually numbered, and given item-level records in the museum's PastPerfect database. Because of the highly detailed description on the photos, I chose accordingly to describe the collection at a much more granular level than I would in a strictly archival institution implementing MPLP strategies. I was able to take advantage of the incredible amount of work already completed on the photos and utilize the item level information in the finding aid by constructing a subject index from the database information, which was added as an appendix to the collection finding aid.

The historical value of these collections to the museum and its community is immense. The photographic content in the McLain and Mielke papers provides numerous views of early Nome prior

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1 Alaska State Archives. (2016, April 26). *Alaska Historical Records Advisory Board (ASHRAB)*. Retrieved from [http://archives.alaska.gov/for\\_professionals/for\\_archives\\_professionals.html](http://archives.alaska.gov/for_professionals/for_archives_professionals.html)

2 Cole, T., & Walsh, J. (1984). *Nome: City of the golden beaches*. Anchorage: Alaska Geographic Society.

to the destruction caused by the 1934 fire, and shows the city flourishing in its Alaska Gold Rush heyday, while the Harnish papers illustrate later years when Nome was a shipping hub for the remote villages of the Norton Sound. The correspondence from the Mielke papers describes the transient, cyclical nature of much of the early Nome population, with residents leaving Nome to conduct business in cities like Seattle and San Francisco for the entire winter while the Bering Sea ice prevented the arrival of ships – many leaving behind families.

A number of Nome residents were not only born and raised there but come from families who have lived in the area for multiple generations. Because of this, the people of Nome are invested in and passionate about their history. I was invited to speak to the Rotary Club, and participated in several meetings and tours by various local groups, including a Library & Museum Commission meeting chaired by the granddaughter of Carrie M. McLain herself. All this activity was in spite of the fact that the museum is currently closed for its upcoming move into a new building. The new space will increase the McLain Museum's capacity to six times that of its previous location, with compact shelving, climate control, exhibit spaces, and a visiting researcher reading room.

The Journeyman Archivist program was an incredible professional and life experience. I am grateful to the ASHRAB for selecting me for this position, to the museum for graciously hosting me in their space, and to the community of Nome for welcoming me.